



TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE



Jill Jones, *The Beautiful Anxiety* (Puncher & Wattmann Poetry, 2014)

Approaching Jill Jones' *The Beautiful Anxiety* you may start to form a strong impression of the collection before you even open the text. The large red semicolons on the grey cover paired with the presence of 'anxiety' in the title may bring to mind current movements in the mental health conversation, especially those of Project Semicolon, which creates a dialogue around the underused punctuation mark. So is Jones' book about mental health? The answer is yes and no. The mental health aspects are there if you are familiar with them; but not picking on the tones of depression and anxiety does not take away from a reader's experience. Most poems will be comfortable enough for the reader through clever depictions of everyday feelings unfolded in clear, sharp language. Jones will not send you scrambling to the dictionary to unpack her words: her words are everyday ones to match her everyday situations.

The collection opens with a poem titled 'My Ruined Lyrics' in which the narrator has trouble composing something, the title suggests a poem or song but the content suggests life. The anxiety begins to show in the third section of the poem. Lines such as 'It was all down to bad timing at a desk,' 'a lack of motivation and petrol,' and 'a kind of unattractive comedy that beats queuing' rings of frustration with modern life, with the empty repetition that begins to feel like a trap (3). War inserts itself into the poem as it intrudes itself into all of life and Jones recognises the consequences that make it an irritant for first world countries, such as the rising cost of oil, but also reminds the reader 'The war wasn't a lie. The bombs dropped.' But this war is a metaphorical one against the trapped, unmotivated mind of the narrator. We can sense this in the lines 'Trace it on the sheet. And this once dream it on the beach' (6). The narrator has not only traced out the borders of where the literal bombs have dropped, but also those of the bombs in her own mind, hoping perhaps that being able to imagine herself happening differently her own mind might change. And so with an encompassing of the repeating themes the collection moves forward.

'What's Coming Next' is another star in the collection. In this poem Jones creates vivid, anxious images; images that you are not always sure what they mean cognitively, but they invoke a strong feeling. Once such line is 'The tabloids have had all coupons torn from them.' If approached from a literal perspective, this image confuses – do tabloids even have coupons? But Jones here is asking the reader to feel the image, not think it. Here a useless object of misinformation is rendered even more useless to the purchaser of the magazine. Another line engages a visual for the feeling of worsening anxiety, 'If today is streaky, tomorrow will be unreasonable,' a beautiful encapsulation of how an irritant can quickly intensify to a situation you want to give up on.

These strong lines of uncertainty, self-doubt, and anxiety can be found throughout the poems each encompassing a feeling that you may have felt, but never been able to verbalise before. Contemplation of a worn down bus stop with root breaking up the sidewalks brings the lines 'Sometimes I wonder if I'm drinking the wrong water' (11) and 'shape is a serious matter, I am not what I am supposed to be' (12). The title poem tells us 'There's never time to know yourself' (28). Another poem, worried about misgivings and memory, declares 'The road we roll on is greater than our parts' (38) Another, 'Big Flower' which attempts to reconcile the dreams of youth with the reality of death tells us:

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I though this proved something
or would make me content with
the way things were, wearisome
worthwhile or perhaps just wonky. (60)

This use of language punctures without a punch. It makes you want to scream yes and underline it five times. And it is not limited to these moments of anxiety. Jones finds ways of making words for everyday images just as impactful. We are given 'the humour of a petticoat,' swimming 'irrelevancies,' 'an inch of an antidote,' and 'xerox[ed] zeppelins.' Each is an illogical image, but each still makes sense.

Jones' descriptions are so unique and clever, that a reader may find their favourite poem in the collection to be the collection of short descriptions titled 'Keen.' These vignettes like sections are more than just clever imagery however. They reveal, like the rest of the collection, fears and doubt and unveil a story of realising a queer identity as a young woman.

Overall *The Beautiful Anxiety* is pure wordy pleasure. Readers who suffer from anxious conditions can appreciate the way Jones addresses their problems without romanticising them. And of course, all readers can enjoy Jones' fantastic use of language and images found throughout.

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